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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 DAMASCUS 000562

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/08/2029  
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [LE](#) [SY](#)  
SUBJECT: SYRIA VP SHARA FINGERED FOR LEAK OF POTUS LETTER  
TO ASAD

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Classified By: CDA Charles Hunter, Reasons 1.4 b and d.

[¶1.](#) (S/NF) Summary: Well-connected media contacts suggest that Syrian VP Farouk Shara leaked word of the President's July letter to Asad during an August 5 meeting with Wiam Wahhab, Druze leader of the Lebanese Tawheed party. Wahhab, ostensibly in Damascus to discuss a renewal of relations between the SARG and Progressive Socialist Party leader Walid Jumblatt, then reportedly shared the information with al-Akbar, a Lebanese daily close to the March 8 coalition and Damascus. Lebanese and other regional media picked up Al-Akbar's August 7 article reporting the POTUS letter to Asad, but Syrian press remained virtually silent on the subject, suggesting a concerted SARG effort to avoid further coverage. End Summary.

[¶2.](#) (S/NF) Al Hayat Bureau Chief Ibrahim Hamidi (strictly protect) told us August 7 the editor of pro-March 8 Lebanese daily al-Akbar had informed him in Damascus on August 5 of plans to run a report on the POTUS letter to President Asad. Hamidi said he was unsure about the source of the information. Hamidi added al-Akbar had few details on the letter's contents, but Hamidi had heard separately the letter discussed Lebanon, Palestinian issues, Hizballah, and Iraq. The al-Akbar editor told Hamidi he believed the letter had been delivered after Senator Mitchell's visit to Damascus.

[¶3.](#) (S/NF) Hamidi said he closely covered Special Envoy Mitchell's July 26 visit to Damascus and heard no mention of a letter from President Obama to Asad. In fact, Hamidi noted, Asad's staff told him in late July the Syrian President had shown "deep concern" over the Syrian Arab News Agency's (SANA) publication of the U.S. President's reply to Asad's congratulatory July 4 national day message. Though the SANA article was not embarrassing, the message to Syrian journalists, Hamidi explained, was that Asad himself wanted to avoid news articles on the exchange of correspondence between the American and Syrian presidents. A week or two after Mitchell's visit, Hamidi continued, he had picked up "rumors" regarding the existence of a POTUS letter to Asad,

but Syrian officials were making it "abundantly clear" Asad wanted no press coverage. As a result, no Syrian journalist who might suspect the existence of such a letter "would dare to touch the story."

¶4. (S/NF) Separately, Wadah abd Rabo (strictly protect), editor-in-chief of Syrian daily al-Watan, told us August 8 that SARG officials were privately furious about the leak of the POTUS letter. According to abd Rabo, Shara met August 5 with Lebanese Druze Tawheed leader Wiam Wahhab and shared knowledge of the President's letter to Asad. Wahhab, in turn, reportedly conveyed the information to the editor of al-Akbar, which ran the story on August 7. According to abd Rabo, the President's inner circle had avoided discussion with the media about the existence of a letter. Those Syrian journalists who had heard about the letter's existence understood there was to be no reporting on the subject. Shara, abd Rabo indicated, may not have been initially briefed on the POTUS letter and possibly learned about it later. No one could be sure about Shara's motives for leaking, abd Rabo said. But senior SARG officials were now privately fingering him as the source of a story that President Asad wanted to keep out of the press.

¶5. (S/NF) Comment: It is possible Hamidi and abd Rabo could be spinning the SARG's leak of the letter as part of an effort to minimize damage to U.S.-Syrian relations or to fish for more details. On the other hand, had the SARG really wanted to exploit the POTUS letter for propaganda purposes, it surely would have revealed more of the letter's substance and the possibility of closer personal relations between the two leaders. It seems equally if not more plausible that Shara leaked the story on his own. Shara has become increasingly marginalized and, according to a Embassy

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contacts, often complains that Bashar fails to brief him and heed his advice. Given Shara's past opposition to U.S.-Syrian rapprochement, he may have leaked the story as a form of protest or to undermine the process. Perhaps the best indicator of SARG intentions comes from the behavior of Hamidi and abd Rabo. Both have reported reliably to us in the past and are well-connected journalists capable of scooping a headline like the existence of a confidential POTUS letter to Asad. The fact that they (and, with one on-line news-site exception, the rest of the Syrian media) are not running a story that is already in the public sphere suggests a concerted SARG effort to tamp down any further publicity.  
HUNTER